

# **PRODIGAL PROPHET**

## ***Misery in the Midst of Mercy***

### ***A Journey through Jonah: Embracing and Extending God's Scandalous Mercy***

**Texts: *Jonah 4:1-11; Exodus 34:6-8***

Jonah 4:1–5 *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup> And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. <sup>3</sup> Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>4</sup> And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?” <sup>5</sup> Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.*

Jonah 4:6-11 *Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. <sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” <sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”*

Exodus 34:6–8 *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” <sup>8</sup> And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.*

Romans 12:19–21 *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” <sup>20</sup> To the contrary, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

## Introduction:

For many weeks now we have enjoyed a front-row seat next to God's servant Jonah as he set out on a mission of mercy that he really did not want to undertake to deliver a message he really did not want to preach to a people he believed were more worthy of God's wrath than His mercy.

Throughout the journey, Jonah has acted in ways that have surprised us given his identity as a prophet officially commissioned to speak for the Lord to His people and to the Lord about His people.

For a prophet, Jonah has been surprisingly quiet on this journey. Almost every word he has uttered thus far has come at the end of a painful process where finally, after exhausting all other options, Jonah speaks – first to the sailors in the midst of the storm, then to God from the belly of a great fish at the bottom of the ocean, and after finally arriving at his destination, he preaches a brief five-word message announcing that God intended to destroy Nineveh in 40 days. Shockingly, that brief message from this reluctant prophet resulted in the greatest revival recorded in the Old Testament – an entire city turned from their idolatry and wickedness to worship the true and living God and to wait desperately for His gracious mercy.

By the way, this is what Abraham did in Genesis 12, 15, and 22. This is what God desired from His covenant nation, Israel. This is what happened in the NT when Paul entered the city of Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:8-10). AND when the Ninevites believed in God and repented from their sins, God relented from the great evil He intended to do to them on account of their great evil that had come up before Him (1:2).

As we have seen, the book of Jonah highlights the measureless mercy of God – a mercy so great and so stunning that it often scandalizes those who witness God bestowing that mercy on others!

In chapter 1, God shows immense mercy to pagan sailors fearing for their lives as they desperately rowed for shore in the midst of the greatest storm they had ever encountered – hearing their prayer, God showed them scandalous mercy!

In chapter 2, God granted scandalous mercy to His rebellious prophet who had arrogantly decided that he would rather perish than repent – and now, at the bottom of the sea he was running out of air and about to run out of life – and God graciously granted Jonah undeserved, unmerited mercy.

This brings us to chapter 3 where we see the most stunning display of mercy thus far in the book – an entire city of wicked, immoral idolaters who are not seeking God or even thinking about Him are graciously confronted by His Word and they repent – all of them! And when God saw their response and witnessed their genuine repentance, He relented of the great evil He was about to pour out on their city as He had done centuries earlier on Sodom and Gomorrah (3:10).

Writing many years after these events, Jonah turns our attention to something that we may have missed along the way. There is someone who is in greater need of mercy than even the Ninevites – and that is Jonah himself!

Scripture reminds us that there is great joy and celebration in Heaven when one sinner comes to repentance (Luke 15:7, 10). There was great joy in Nineveh on account of God's gracious mercy and there was even greater joy in Heaven on account of their repentance. But in the midst of all this joyful celebration on earth and in heaven, there was one person who was most miserable – and when Jonah points him out, we find that he has identified this miserable man as himself – the prodigal prophet.

After witnessing the shocking, unexpected repentance of the Ninevites and realizing they were going to get mercy from God and not judgment – Jonah made his way to a hill outside the city, built a shelter from the heat, and sat in angry silence hoping against hope that their repentance would not last. Perhaps it would wear away in a week or so and the city would return to its idolatry and wickedness and then God would have no other option but to judge them.

So what are we to make of this stunning reality – a prodigal prophet sitting on a hill burning in anger after he witnessed one of the greatest displays of mercy in the entire Old Testament?

More specifically – how are we supposed to feel and respond to God when He decides to do something we really believe He should not do? Put differently, how are we to respond when the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God does not appear to be good and is definitely not acceptable to us?

If we are honest this morning, from time to time we have found ourselves on the same hill sitting right next to Jonah under his booth – stewing over the fact that God chose to show mercy to someone we believe He should have judged or punished for what they have done to us or to someone we love.

When God's sovereign mercy scandalizes or offends us, Jonah comes alongside us and says, *"Let me tell you my story. Let me share the things God had to teach me on that hill! The lessons God taught me there were painful but they led me to restored life, renewed spirit, and true rejoicing in who God is and what He did for me, in me, and now through me! And I suspect He wants to do the same for you!"*

So this morning, let's allow Jonah to lead us through these four verses so that we don't miss what was going on in his heart and so that we allow what God taught Jonah to shape our own hearts and adjust our own thinking this morning.

And to do this well, we need to follow Jonah's story carefully as it unfolds along two lines – Jonah's heart to God (4:1-5) and God's heart for Jonah (4:6-11).

So as we join Jonah on his hill, the very first thing he points out to us is the burning anger that was raging in his heart as he witnessed the incredible mercy of God on Nineveh.

## I. Burning Anger (4:1)

*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.*

- Jonah had very definite ideas and strong feelings about who, when, how, and why God should show mercy or bring wrath upon people who were sinning against God or against His people.
- And at the top of the list of those who were most deserving of God's fiercest wrath and most severe judgment were the Assyrians. They were world-class idolaters. They were known for their fierce cruelty. And Israel had long tasted oppression from them.
- So when God first told Jonah that he was sending him to Nineveh to warn them that their great evil had come up against Him, Jonah was eager to see judgment fall on this nation that had so oppressed his own.
- But when God decided to grant them repentance and extend gracious mercy to them – it was more than Jonah could endure and when that mercy came, it displeased Jonah!

### A. *The Reason for His Anger – it displeased Jonah*

- The thing God had decided to do displeased Jonah.
- Literally, it was a “*great evil*” to him.
- And the thing God determined to do is articulated in 3:10 – “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”
- If any nation deserved to experience “Divine Disaster” it was Nineveh – and Jonah knew it.
- The fact that after just one day of preaching and prayers of repentance their disaster was averted, and their city was spared was almost unthinkable to Jonah.
- How could God justify this after punishing His own people repeatedly over the centuries for sins that were far less extensive and offensive than those of Nineveh.

- If anyone deserved mercy it was Israel – and they got judgment. If anyone deserved judgment, it was Nineveh – and they got mercy!
- And the moral injustice of this scandalous display of Divine Mercy was a “great evil” in Jonah’s eyes!

#### *B. The Strength of His Anger – it displeased Jonah exceedingly*

- The grammar of this passage indicates the intensity of Jonah’s anger at what he had witnessed.
- It was greatly offensive – it was morally, theologically, and spiritually objectionable.
- The idea behind the text is that the anger and displeasure in Jonah were like a raging, burning fire – he burned with anger.
- We would say that he was “furious” or “enraged” by what had happened.
- But who was his anger directed toward?

#### *C. The Object of His Anger*

- Jonah was not angry at Nineveh; rather, his anger was directed at God on account of what God had determined to do against Jonah’s wishes and in conflict with Jonah’s strongly held theological beliefs.
- And at the end of the day, this anger at God was both unjust and a great evil on Jonah’s part.

#### *D. The Sinfulness of His Anger*

- One of the functions of God’s Word is to help us learn to think God’s thoughts after Him – and thinking God’s thoughts after Him means that we endeavor to shape our mind and heart by His Word so that we learn to think as He thinks and feel like He feels about life, people, and circumstances.
- On a practical level, this means we should embrace and celebrate what pleases God and we should reject and hate what God hates.
- In this case, all of heaven was rejoicing with God over the repentance of the Ninevites – but Jonah was burning with anger! In other words, he was not thinking like God nor was he feeling the way God felt about what had just happened.

- When we are angry in the right ways at the things that make God angry – that is righteous anger. But when we are angry at something that pleases God or that He has pleased to do, then that is unrighteous anger!
- And that is exactly the kind of anger that is burning in Jonah and that sometimes burns in us!
- Jonah was confused, dismayed, discouraged, and angry!
- We often find ourselves in similar circumstances when God does something we don't understand or that disrupts our lives and unsettles our theological foundations – and when God does this it is easy to grow discouraged and even angry!

## II. Biblical Complaint (4:2)

*And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."*

- For the second time in the book, Jonah prays to the Lord.
- The term "Yahweh" indicates that Jonah is talking to God in view of His covenant relationship with Israel.
- To be sure, Yahweh is God over all the nations – but He has a unique and special relationship with one of those nations – Jonah's nation, Israel.
- And God has just done something that not only conflicted with everything Jonah's theology taught him to believe about God, but it also had extremely severe consequences for the nation with whom God had made His covenant.
- In other words, God had done something for another nation that He should have done for His own. And furthermore, when He extended mercy to this nation, He knew full well that this nation would one day bring horrific judgment on His own covenant people.
- And so Jonah raises his voice in anger and states – "This is exactly what I said would happen when we first talked about going to Nineveh! And to make sure this very thing would not happen, I fled to Tarshis!"
- Behind my thinking and my fleeing was something I knew and believed about you!

*A. This complaint was grounded on accurate theology:*

- Jonah quotes the core theological creed that God had given to Israel through Moses in Exodus 34:6-8.
  - Exodus 34:6–8 *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,<sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”<sup>8</sup> And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.*
- This text stresses two important theological realities about God: 1). God is gracious, merciful, and forgiving; and, 2) God is righteous and just who will punish the guilty.
- Jonah’s entire prophetic ministry was grounded on these two theological realities about Yahweh, Israel’s God.
- And with regard to the extensive, exhaustive wickedness of Nineveh, God’s righteousness and justice demanded that He punish Nineveh for their great wickedness that had finally come to the point that it had “come up before God” – a way of saying that their wickedness had gone on so long and was so vile that finally, God was bound to pour out His wrath and overthrow them like He had done with the world in Noah’s day and with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham’s day.
- In other words, Jonah’s theology allowed for grace and mercy but not at the expense of justice and wrath.

*B. This complaint expressed partial theology:*

*I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster*

- Jonah’s complaint was that God had chosen the wrong part of His character upon which to base His actions toward Nineveh.
- I remembered that you are gracious.
- I remembered that you are merciful.
- I know that you are longsuffering toward evildoers and sinners.
- I know that you abound in compassion (hesed).
- And I suspected that you were going to show mercy to Nineveh and that you would relent from carrying out the disaster you originally intended to do to them and that they richly deserved!



- And this is exactly what you did! BUT what you should have done is based your actions on the other part of your character – your righteous justice.
- Had you used that lens, you would by no means have acquitted these great sinners who are sinning a great evil against you and your people!
- Jonah’s issue was not with God’s mercy – but with His justice! In other words, when God’s mercy triumphed over judgment, Jonah was infuriated!
- But why did Jonah have such an objection to divine mercy. -- especially after having received so much of it himself?

*C. This complaint resulted in deficient and deformed theology.*

- Simply put, Jonah believed that the proper objects of God’s mercy were His people and the proper objects of His wrath were the enemies of His people.
- Jonah had no problem with God granting mercy to a few pagan sailors when they repented; he had no issue with God granting mercy to select Gentiles when they turned to Israel’s God and embraced Israel’s covenant.
- But when God chose to show mercy on the entire Assyrian nation totally apart from any association with God’s chosen nation or without having to embrace the Mosaic covenant – this was unthinkable!
- If you wanted mercy, there was a certain way to get it – and turning to Israel’s God was only part of the process. You had to become a part of God’s chosen people and you had to embrace the covenant practices and lifestyles laid out in the Law of Moses (circumcision, food laws, etc).
- And all of a sudden – Jonah came face to face with something God had done that blew up all of his strongly held convictions about who could and who could not receive God’s mercy and become part of Abraham’s family when they exercised Abraham’s faith!
- In other words, Jonah’s theology did not have room for Ninevites. It had room for disobedient, unrepentant Israelites. It had room for a stubborn, self-righteous, spiritually arrogant prophet – but it had no room for Ninevites no matter how well they repented.
- *“God, these people are not worthy of mercy. They are not seeking mercy. And they have not just been sinning against you – they have been sinning against me and my people. And so there is no way you should be sowing*

*mercy to them at all! What you should be giving them is pure unadulterated, righteous judgment!"*

- All of us have a Nineveh of our own – and when God chooses to be gracious to them, or to bless them, or to delay the punishment we believe they richly deserve and that we are so eager for them to receive – we end up burning with the same anger toward God that was burning in Jonah.

### III. Bold Challenge (4:3)

*Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

- Try as he might, Jonah could not reconcile God's decision to show mercy to Assyria (Nineveh was the capital of Assyria during Jonah's day) after one single occasion of repentance with the reality that God was going to judge His own people for sins that in Jonah's mind were much less offensive and pervasive than those of Nineveh/Assyria.
- How could God spare pagan Nineveh and judge His own covenant people, Israel?
- Jonah preached God's word to Israel and warned them of His coming wrath and God did not choose to grant them repentance. But as soon as Jonah preached that same word and delivered the very same warning to Nineveh, God granted them repentance and they turned from their sin and God relented of the evil He intended to bring upon them.
- Jonah's righteous anger at the sins of Nineveh has become unrighteous anger at God.
- Jonah obeyed God's command but clearly, he has not submitted to God's will.
- Jonah has evaluated God's actions and decisions and concluded they are a "great evil" in his sight.
- And Jonah is not about to let God get away with this evil.
- And so he does something stunning – he takes a play from Moses' intercession for Israel and uses it to try to manipulate God and to force God to do Jonah's will on earth and reverse His decision to show mercy.
- Moses begged God to spare Israel – but if God would not spare Israel, Moses desired for God to blot him out (Ex 32).

- Here Jonah asks God not to spare Nineveh – but if He does spare them, Jonah asks God to kill him.
- Jonah would rather die than live in a world where God acted in ways that were so fundamentally offensive to Jonah.
- And before we judge Jonah – let's reflect on the fact that sometimes God delays judgment or shows great mercy to those who have sinned grievously against us or hurt us deeply – and the pain of enduring this injustice from the hand of God is almost too much to bear – and we would sometimes rather die!

#### IV. Benevolent Grace (4:4)

*And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"*

- Jonah is angry because God is not.
- At the heart of Jonah's anger is a fundamental disagreement with:
  - What God has done – show undeserved mercy;
  - Who He has done it too – wicked, pagan gentiles;
  - What this means – mercy at the expense of justice;
  - What this really exposes about Jonah:
- Jonah is exposed as a prodigal prophet who is not at all like the God he serves:
  - Hard-hearted
  - Self-righteous
  - Spiritually arrogant
  - Theologically Deficient
- And this is not the first time Jonah has evaluated God and decided that God was in the wrong.
- For the second time, Jonah decided that he was wiser than God and that he was more righteous than God.
- And for the second time, God shows grace and extends mercy to his prodigal servant, Jonah.
- And the grace of God is delivered to Jonah with a gentle, probing question designed to stir Jonah's conscience: "Are you right to be this angry?"

· *“Jonah, you are convinced that my decision to show mercy to Nineveh was a great evil in your sight. And you have developed great anger in your heart toward me, even after all the undeserved mercy I have shown you. So I have a question for you – Is your anger right? Is it just and upright? You are angry at me for being unjust in showing mercy. I want to know if you are unjust in your anger against me?”*

· God is gracious, kind, patient, and persistent – and rather than letting Jonah remain in his sinful anger – God lovingly pursues this prodigal prophet with 3 questions designed first to reveal and then to repair the evil that has crept up in Jonah’s heart.

## V. Bitter Silence (4:5)

*Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.*

· Jonah has issued a very foolish ultimatum – destroy Nineveh or destroy me!

· But God is wiser and kinder than Jonah and determines by His gracious mercy to spare both Nineveh and His prodigal prophet.

· But in order to spare Jonah, God has to break through the wall of silence Jonah has built between himself and God.

· Instead of answering the question God has put to Jonah’s ultimatum, he leaves Nineveh and seated himself under a booth he made in order to wait and see what God would ultimately do at the end of the 40 days.

· *“God, surely you won’t choose to spare wicked gentile idolaters who have so quickly repented over the life of one of your faithful prophets who has preached and served you faithfully in your house for many years!”*

· And here is the crux of the matter – in one simple question God has exposed the same evil in Jonah that Luke describes was in the heart of the older brother who was angry at his father for welcoming and celebrating the return of the prodigal younger son (Luke 15:11-32).

· Like the older brother, Jonah did not have a heart like his Father! In Luke 15, the father rejoiced that he had regained the life of his lost son, but the older brother despised the brother whose life was saved and was angry at his father.

- Jonah despised the Ninevites and was angry that God had spared them!
- And so we see that though he does not yet see it, the greatest evil in the book resided in Jonah – but God is not done!!
- In the meantime, while we wait for God to continue teaching Jonah, what are the lessons we need to make sure we learn today?

## Conclusion:

1. *God is inherently gracious and merciful!* It is easy to rejoice when we are the sinners who receive mercy; it is much harder when that mercy is extended to those who sin against us!
2. *God is inherently righteous and relentlessly just* – He always judges sin. . . always! This means that God's mercy is never extended at the expense of His justice.
3. *God is inherently faithful and true* – He always tells the truth and He always keeps His word. This means that He will always help us see the truth about ourselves and He will faithfully use the truth of His word to conform us to the truth of His image.